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Suicide Prevention via Self-Care

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By Lt. Christopher Ragsdale, BUMED, Wounded, Ill and Injured



If leaders demonstrate a self-care plan, they can readily ask others what they do to take care of themselves. (Photo by Sarah Piest)

The dedication and commitment our Marines and Sailors offer one another is amazing, but what happens when someone has dumped every bit of energy, emotionally and/or physically, into their job?

Some call that dedication. If they have given every last drop of energy into their job and neglected other aspects of their life, is it a sign of a problem? If they can't recover quickly to contribute 100 percent the next day, does it mean that they have failed us...or does this mean we have failed them?

Each September we highlight the need to prevent suicides among our ranks, and each year the month passes and suicide rates remains steady, indicating that possibly the message, however well intended, isn't effectively reducing or preventing suicide. With that said I pose a challenge to all leaders.

Challenge 1: Leaders, what are you doing to take care of yourselves?



Each year the month passes and suicide rates remains steady.

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Can you demonstrate that you have a plan to recharge your batteries at the end of the day?

Can you demonstrate that you have a plan to recharge your batteries at the end of the day? Does your plan set a healthy example for those around you? Does the plan meet the 21st Century Sailor and Marine initiative that includes: Readiness, Safety, Physical fitness, inclusion and continuum of service? Does your plan draw from what our suicide prevention program identifies as protective factors that include: unit cohesion, humor, healthy lifestyle, effective problem-solving skills, optimistic outlook, spiritual support, beliefs counter to suicide and positive attitude about getting help? If leaders demonstrate a self-care plan, they can readily ask others what they do to take care of themselves.

If the Sailor or Marine can't effectively respond to this inquiry, it provides an opportunity to explain how you have developed your own individual plan. During your

conversation you can explain how the plan contributes to your health goals, your personal goals and the goals of the team. You can assist your Sailors and Marines to develop their own plan and the added benefit of simultaneously understanding the strengths that individual brings to a unit. You can also understand if there are areas that can be strengthened. It also creates an opportunity to help understand a person's potential risk factors. Over time, if a person is not able to demonstrate or develop a plan it creates a great opportunity to nudge them to seek assistance.

This type of support can be in the form of linking them to a resource they didn't know was available. Such help can also be in form of mental health or spiritual guidance. Linking to these resources could enhance their life and increase their effectiveness at their job. By adding protective factors early we may be heading off mental health problems and even a suicide.



Does your plan set a healthy example for those around you? (U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Christopher K. Hwang)

Challenge 2: Can a self-care model be initiated without a lot of documentation? Hopefully there will be no paperwork. Making a set of forms to accomplish a self-care plan could be counterproductive and may be treated with some suspicion.



We want to avoid scenarios like not allowing someone to take leave because they have not developed a plan. It could be awkward especially if an individual was planning a trip so they could take care of themselves. The goal of these challenges should be that we emphasize the message of, "we want you to take care of yourself."

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Assist your Sailors and Marines to develop their own plan and the added benefit of simultaneously understanding the strengths that individual brings to a unit. U.S. Navy photo by MCSN Pyoung K. Yi)

It sounds a little selfish at first, but it makes sense. It is hard to take care of others, if you don't take care of yourself.

So, what are you doing to take care of yourself?

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